


2016

Complicated Agency

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Recommended Citation

Lonsway, B. (2016). Complicated Agency. In S. Lukas (Ed.), *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces* (pp. 239-247). Pittsburgh: ETC Press.

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Complicated Agency

By Brian Lonsway

I want to start with the obvious, or at least what is obvious to me: themed environments are authentic. They are in every way genuine, original, real, primary. They are of their own, and fashion themselves after other environments not to imitate them, but rather to reconstruct or re-contextualize them in new (authentic) ways. Yet somehow—unfathomably to me—this is not an accepted truism, especially in certain scholarly circles. There, it appears essential to position themed environments in an invented hierarchy of authenticity, below environments defined *prima facie* as “real,” or “original,” or (perhaps most frightening to me) “natural.” The goal of this positioning is ultimately to empower human agency with a comfort of truth that gives us a reason to exist, authentically. The “fake,” by denying us contact with the real, must somehow make our humanity, our *raison d’être*, less valuable. But are we not simply playing a semantic game when we decry a real experience as fake? Whether or not a themed environment may appear to simulate another (apparently not themed) environment, in the way Las Vegas’ Venetian Hotel and Casino is fashioned from references to Venetian architecture, my experience of the Venetian is every bit as real as my experience of Venice. The Venetian itself: every bit as real as Venice itself. My experience in a themed environment, constructed and narratively framed as it may be, is real, sensorial, and personally meaningful; as a result of such an experience, have I not in fact become more empowered with the complexities of my reality?

What underlies the discrimination of authentic from inauthentic environments—and the naïve and unfortunate association of theming with the latter—is the belief that the creators of themed environments wish somehow to be duplicitous, to trick us into believing that we are where we are not or who we are not (thus the corporeal fear of becoming “fake,” etymologically to be of obscure origin, to be “in the fold.”) But the history of themed environment design, from ancient cultures to the brandscape, reveals this not to be the case. The theme is meant, quite explicitly, to complement our identities; to enrich our play; to provide a more curious, and often more provocative, reality rather than to detract from it. Distraction, maybe; detraction, no.

Only by acknowledging the authenticity of the themed environment can we begin with a foundation for critical inquiry that considers them alongside every other environment of our construction (material or cultural): parks, cities, houses, cemeteries, hospitals, and so forth. (It’s worth noting that these, too, have been themed either implicitly or explicitly, to varying degrees depending on their own collective histories and cultural contexts.) The value of this point of departure is that we are able to better understand the agencies of and behind themed environments, as well as what the impacts of these agencies have on their inhabitation, than if themed environments are taken to be something other than or apart from our “more authentic” environments. We are, in other words, able to level the playing field and open our inquiry into the themed environment armed with valuable tools of spatial/environmental critique that have been evolved for the analysis of other spatial forms. And vice versa. Critiquing Disneyland, in other words, should fundamentally be no different than critiquing the Victoria and Albert, or my house.

None of this is to say, however, that there isn’t something complicated about the themed environment, especially as the lines blur between what is and what isn’t explicitly themed. In 2009’s *Making Leisure Work: Architecture and the Experience Economy*, I pulled apart many of the narrative constructions of the themed environment, seeking to better understand what makes it tick and how its spatialized narratives have impacted lived experience.¹ Whether exploring the visual design techniques of a mid-century American theme park, the cultural veracity of cheese-making in a Japanese

themed residential village in the Netherlands, or the psychological impacts of themed environment design for Alzheimer's care, I have to testify to the often complicated roles that people are anticipated, expected, or required to play to make the themed experience a success. Whether an owner, designer, visitor, resident, employee, or critic, the very real—very authentic—impact of the themed environment is to complicate your agency at the service of the thematic backstory.

This, in fact, is the art and science of the themed environment: the careful material construction and managerial maintenance of the “sticky” (to borrow Malcolm Gladwell's term for a brand narrative that sticks with you) backstory—the (literally) composed narratives that guide all design and construction. Understanding these acts as intending to complement rather than deceive allows the critic to see their power on the terms of the creators: a power to expand the narrative potentials of the built environment. As I and others have written, this is the core inspiration of the so-called “Experience Economy.”² In a saturated glocalized service economy where offerings can easily lack distinction, the tenants of the Experience Economy propose that human experience itself is an essential medium of differentiation in the contemporary marketplace. B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, the prime movers of the Experience Economy framework, offer that the customer (transformed by a brand experience) is the real product of the Experience Economy. Pine and Gilmore's writings and consultancy build upon the already well-established efforts of Hollywood, the Walt Disney Company, and their successors to merge the storytelling capacity of spatial and cultural experience with the storytelling needs of successful public relations/branding campaigns. Not all theming is so explicitly tied to branding initiatives of course; at its core, theming is ultimately about impacting human experience through immersion in a narrative. But when tied to a company's bottom-line through advertising or customer experience budgets, the very expensive propositions of the Experience Economy are meticulously planned and managed, translating to an obsessive management of the narratively-framed customer experience. In the Disney theme parks for example, where no expense is spared to assure a fluid and consistent experience for the visitor, attractions are repaired and visually touched-up nightly and every detail from hardware (screws, hinges, and so forth) to hairnets are consistent with an area's backstory documents.³

The realization of these details, whether as obsessive as Disney's or more akin to those informing our experiences at Barnes and Noble, Starbucks, Trader Joe's, or Chipotle, is a significant design undertaking that requires intense collaboration between designers and brand managers. Companies rely on designers' abilities to create immersive experiences across media (including space, like the space of a retail outlet, for example) that directly engage customers. But what are they engaging? Sensory capacity? Physical movement? Psychological aptitude? Mental acuity? All of these, yes, but also quite importantly: human agency. If the transformation of the customer through a transformational experience *is* the product of the Experience Economy, then it is precisely the impact on human agency that is the holy grail of brand marketing.

The entirety of the theme-based experience economy is to affect agency in this way: ideally, to fold in layers of positive experience that leave one feeling “in good hands,” “taken care of,” “enriched,” “fulfilled,” or “transformed” by the company or organization in question. If I want a consistently known coffee experience around the world, Starbucks will dependably fulfill this desire. If I want to feel like I'm bargain shopping while embracing euro-contemporary design, Ikea will take care of me. These stores—these experiences—do not destroy or defeat my human agency (in limited scope of this example, to remove my ability to shop elsewhere). Rather, they fold in additional layers of brand affiliation that are meant to complement (and complicate) my spatial experience.

The more spatially immersive a theme (at the service of a commercial brand or not), the greater the effect on agency there can be. The fantastical narratives underpinning a theme park (and the design realizations that spatialize them) are intended to immerse the visitor completely within the story, actively shifting the visitor's agency toward that of a role-player within the narrative itself. Of course, the shift can never be complete. Disney doesn't expect to trick a visitor to Tomorrowland to believe that they're visiting the future. Rather, they seek to convince them that they are believably visiting a segment of a theme park that is based on stories about the future. They are concerned, in other words, with providing an authentic experience of a real place (called Tomorrowland) in the real world. Similarly, while much has been written about the ersatz of Main Street, U.S.A., the nineteenth-century-Americana-themed entrance promenade at Disneyland and its progeny, the specific design goal of Main Street, U.S.A. is to embed visitors in a controlled experience of the very twentieth-century Main Street, U.S.A.—not of a simulacrum of an idealized nineteenth-century American main street. Walt may

have modeled the company's first design on a mash-up of waning American main streets, but it was to Disneyland he was drawing them, not to those waning urban centers.

"Fake," as I mentioned earlier, has at its etymological roots a notion of folding: specifically, a loop one makes when coiling a rope.⁴ From there, through senses of concealed origins, contrivances, and ultimately counterfeits, fake has come to its present definition. A fake, we take for granted, is something to be dismissed, something not authentic. "Complicated," too, finds its roots in the fold: here, a folding together.⁵ But the complication is not a fake; both may be folds, but they are folds of a very different nature. Complications reveal entanglements *within* our (authentic) experiences; fakes conceal their loops outside of them. It is for this reason that I find it essential for a study of themed environments that we see their folds of narrative as complications rather than fakes. It is the very authenticity of the themed environment that complicates our lived experiences; it isn't a reductively polarizing matter of authentic experience versus fake experience. Rather, it is a complicated matter of complicated experiences that the layers of narrative impose on us. And it also complicates my job as a critic. But that's the fun part.

My choice of "complicated" over "complex" is intentional. I rest my understanding on their difference with the following quite simple explanation by Paul Cilliers.

If a system—despite the fact that it may consist of a huge number of components—can be given a complete description in terms of its individual constituents, such a system is merely *complicated*. Things like jumbo jets or computers are complicated. In a *complex* system, on the other hand, the interaction among constituents of the system, and the interaction between the system and its environment, are of such a nature that the system as a whole cannot be fully understood simply by analysing its components. Moreover, these relationships are not fixed, but shift and change, often as a result of self-organisation.⁶

I foist the term "complicated" on the question of agency to argue that even the strange layers of experience that affect our activities and our choices in the themed environment are "merely" complicated, and not complex. Of course there are complex aspects to everything, and the themed environment is no exception; I write this well aware of the limits of the claim. Just try to wrangle with the history and politics of the formation of Walt Disney's Reelway Enterprises and Reedy Creek Development District, both created to surreptitiously acquire Florida land and form a new form of geo-political entity to manage it.⁷ I am not intending to suggest that agency itself is not a complex concept, but rather to argue that, within the complexities of our agency, the impacts of the themed environment are but complications.

The framework of agency that I am using here is one loosely affiliated with actor network theory, built upon in recent years by a handful of architectural theorists seeking to better understand the politics of our relationship to the built environment.⁸ These politics involve multiple agencies that include the activities of real estate developers, building owners, municipalities and their representatives, designers, engineers, employees, residents, visitors, passers-by, and others. And, as offered to us by at least certain interpretations of actor network theory, we can include the agency of the objects and artifacts produced by these individuals and their activities. As humans, we employ this agency to act in particular ways in particular situations, with and against the myriad other agencies in our contexts. In architectural theory, the understanding of an agency constituted by the capabilities, capacities, and powers of the actor-network—the interchanges between components in a system—has opened up a rich exploration of the complexities of our power relationships to the built environment. I have argued that the theming narratives themselves—including the bodies that invent and manage them—are essential actors in this network, shifting (complicating) the kind of agency we have when our physical spatial environments are constructed to maintain adherence to a sticky backstory. We are required to engage these stories, even if our engagement is to reject or avoid them, and construct our agency in direct relationship to them. Is there a story? What is it? Am I part of it? How? What do I feel about the story? Is it changing my behavior? What do I think of this? How can or should I act?

My experience with diverse rhetorics surrounding the themed environment, from personal testimonials and corporate ephemera to scholarly writing, fandom websites, and "critical" guidebooks, has revealed a tendency to oversimplify the impacts of these constructions. On one hand, there is the enthusiastic fan who sees Disney as simply a fun place to visit without acknowledging its vast commercial efforts to wrap its visitors ever more inside its brand. On the other hand, there

is the critic who dismisses the themed environment outright, as either a corporate blight on the landscape or simply a subject not worthy of study. None of these simplifications help us advance a productive and proactive critical theory of—or critical engagement with—the themed environment. A more richly nuanced understanding is required, one that reveals the shifted agencies of the themed environment, but which does not mark them impenetrably complex.

What I hope to offer with the provocation of complicated agency is not only a more direct embrace of the nuances of recent re-engagements with questions of agency in the context of the built environment, but a way to enfold layers of once-perceived contradictions, dualist dialectics, and over-simplified power dynamics into a more relevant and empowering critical framework that helps us better understand the effects of the themed environment.

KidZania

I would like to take as my case study a recently formed and rapidly expanding themed environment that manifests these complications in a profound way: KidZania. KidZania is itself a complicated concept. Founded in 1996 under the vision of Xavier López Ancon and Luis Javier Laresgoiti as a hybrid day care center/entertainment destination, KidZania (originally *La Ciudad de los Niños*, or The Children's City/The City of Children) currently manages 20 “edutainment” destinations across the globe (with others announced for the next few years) for four to fourteen year olds. Each location features a diverse set of experiences based on adult jobs, from airline pilots to firefighters and car mechanics to fast food burger flippers. These are set within a themed interior designed around the principles of a western-style streetscape, with each venue encapsulated in its own thematic enclosure inside the various buildings (see image 24.1). The streetscapes are generally two-story, although everything is scaled down to kids' size, making it a bit uncanny for a 6'-2" voyeur like myself to even enter the interior's interiors. (In fact, parents are strongly discouraged from entering the “active” areas so kids can be entirely only their own with the center's own adult leaders.) Radio broadcasts created by kids in the on-air studio are carried on radios throughout the center, newborn babies are taken care of, bank accounts are opened, surgeries are performed, pizzas are made, and degrees are sought. KidZania is kind of “Job Experience Theme Park” or Grownup-land.

The jobs in KidZania operate in each center's own narratively constructed civic sphere according to the principles of (or at least the narrative of the principals of) the free market. Given 50 KidZos (the local currency) upon entry, children can earn additional KidZos “working” at various venues, with a sliding scale of incomes roughly modeled after adult job salaries. KidZos can be spent as well, sometimes to buy things like groceries (plastic props which have to be returned to the store), sometimes to buy trinkets or memorabilia (that are then owned by the purchaser), and sometimes to pay for designated work experiences. Should KidZanians open a bank account, they can deposit their KidZos and manage them through a debit card. Should they pay for and sit in on a college course, their earnings go up. If they're unsure of which job to start with, children can go the job placement center, fill out a skill-evaluation test, and receive a recommended career path. Each venue has around 60 jobs that can be performed, each located in its own iconographically styled interior that is arrayed along the streetscape of KidZania.

It is truly a remarkable experience. I have a young child, and while I visited Dubai's KidZania solo, I couldn't help but see it through his eyes. It is a playground that materializes all the props, clothing, and environmental and sensorial cues that form the ecology of a child's fantasy role-play. Their carefully crafted spatial relationships maintain the grander theme of KidZania, immersing the child not only within each activity, but across them, in a narrative of KidZanian urban life and political identity. It is a highly immersive experience, for the adult as well as the kid, and as such, really mucks with our sense of agency.

KidZania's complications begin even within its own identity. KidZania is both the name of the company and the name of the geo-political identity that each venue portrays. KidZania is described as a kind of nation-state—formed through political foment among children—with each venue ambiguously serving both as a replication of *the* KidZanian urban center and/or *one of* the many independent KidZanian cities. Within the company's corporate hierarchy, directors of each venue are considered (and semi-officially titled) mayors, with governors above them, and with Lopez himself as president (although he jokes he should be considered dictator because he wasn't elected).⁹



Image 24.1. Part of the streetscape in KidZania Dubai (Photo by Brian Lonsway)

The backstory of KidZania's political identity is an origin story, filled with frustration, liberation, and independence as its core themes.

The Time Had Come

The kids of the world became utterly fed up. Looking at the way the adults were running the world had become an exercise in exasperation. Governments operated inefficiently, societies were becoming inequitable, valuable resources were routinely squandered and values were seemingly more and more negotiable.

With principles wavering and violence increasing, it became apparent that kids would be inheriting a less than ideal world. Something had to be done and they were the ones prepared to do it.

The kids decided to create their own nation

This was a world full of opportunities where kids could assert themselves and be responsible. This was a world full of possibilities for sharing ideas and gaining knowledge. And this was a world where kids could think and act independently from adults. What the kids envisioned, was a real world made perfect which ultimately made it "the place" where kids wanted to be.

A declaration is made

Following the spirit of many independent thinkers in history, kids decided to mark this moment and write an official Declaration of Independence. This proclaimed their sovereignty as a group united in purpose and announced their new world's existence.¹⁰

Ultimately, the backstory continues, a *League of RightZ* is established, with a group of mascots defined as RightZkeepers appointed “to guarantee that KidZania’s belief system would always be represented and also to ensure the RightZ would be remembered forever.”¹¹ This is followed by an anthem, a flag, a language (English that selectively uses “K” or “Z” for effect, like “Kai” for hi, or “Z-U” for see-you) the currency (KidZos), and the governance system that moves from president, locally elected kid’s Congrezzes, and on-site adult “Zupervisors.”¹²

Within this political structure, work (on the part of the kids-as-visitors) occurs within a public-private continuum (which jobs are modeled on the public sector and which are modeled on the private sector varies from country to country—“country” here referring to the officially recognized geopolitical entity within which a KidZania sits). Some jobs, such as fighting fires and policing streets are more or less identified with the culturally recognized costumes and symbols of the host country. Others result from close partnerships established with national or international brands.

A child, whose responsible caregivers choose to wait in the second floor Parent’s Lounge (where children are not allowed), decides to visit the Coca-Cola bottling plant to “learn the process of manufacturing their own bottle of Coca-Cola, from the bottle hygiene and cleansing process, to filling and packaging.”¹³ After paying with her KidZania credit card (filled with KidZos from her entrance fee and other earned jobs) the girl dons a Coke-red trademark-enblazoned apron, retrieves an empty plastic bottle, washes it, places it in a disinfecting light-box, fills it with syrup, adds carbonated water, seals it, disinfects it again, and labels it. The process takes all of 90 seconds, and involves the moving of a bottle and the pressing of buttons. It is overseen by a trained Zupervisor who has the particular challenge of assuring that this girl, like all the children, avoids spilling her very full bottle of Coke when removing it from the carbonation machine and capping it. During this process, she has been watched by other caregivers—by those with children four years and under from inside the main bottling room, and by other parents of older children who have nonetheless chosen to escort their children through the streets of KidZania.

In the midst of bottling, a fire alarm sounds—the hotel across the street from the bottling plant is “on fire.” In short order, the sound of a fire truck appears in the distance (see image 242). Of course, to the Zupervisor (and anyone who has been to this KidZania before), this is a regular occurrence, with the Flamingo (get it—“Flaming-o”) hotel bursting into audio-visual flames multiple times a day. But to the bottling plant employees, this is an intense distraction. The young girl’s gaze averts from the bottling process, and others’ necks are craned to see across the street, only to be frustrated by the crowds gathered on the street between the plant and the hotel. Soon, a fire truck arrives on scene, and children wearing fire-fighter outfits step out and up to a set of hoses to spray water (actual water) onto the building. Sensors are activated by water pressure to turn off the fire effects so that the kids are ultimately able to put the fire out on their own. Crisis averted, the fire subsides, and the children are trucked back to the fire station to collect their wages and move on to their next experience.

The girl departs the bottling plant with her own DIY bottle of Coke, returns her apron, and moves on.

There is no doubt that even this brief exposure has some educational value as a hands-on experience, especially to the older child if reinforced and discussed afterwards by caregivers. This belief is at the core of KidZania’s “CSR,” or Corporate Social Responsibility mission—to be an educational destination that is at the same time entertaining. But as themed environments of this immersive caliber are expensive to create and maintain, KidZania’s mission (the corporate mission, that is, not the narrative mission of KidZania the “country”) calls for a strong brand-affiliation strategy to ensure global appeal, return visitorship, and a willingness to spend heavily on admission prices. The pure genius of KidZania is that it enfoldes immersive environment design, a unique take on environmental branding, and fantasy child’s play into a seamless spatial experience that is immensely profitable. KidZania leverages environmental immersion as an “interactive publicity” opportunity for companies who partner with KidZania, constructing KidZania’s own brand through brand affiliations with others.¹⁴ In addition to direct funds, partners provide professional expertise, props, and other complementary materials so that a visitor’s



Image 24.2. A fire truck negotiating the streets of KidZania Dubai (Photo by Brian Lonsway)

experience with their brand feels “authentic,” and is well aligned with jobs and skills appropriate to the partner’s brand. KidZania represents environmental branding at its apotheosis—a highly controlled narrative brand experience.

Kids flip burgers at a McDonald’s, work at a Coca-Cola bottling production line, tune up a car at an A C Delco service Station, buy groceries at a Waitrose, or clean teeth at a Colgate dental clinic. Not only do children wear branded outfits and become exposed to the brand through expected product placements and environmental graphics, but most powerfully, their play-work involves the performance of actions that reinforce their connection to the brand.

We have a very strong principal that what we do is to copy real life so when you’re walking down the street you don’t have say “supermarket” or “gas station,” you have Walmart or HSBC.¹⁵

Lopez’s claim is warranted by a certain measure; the environment might appear less true-to-life if it avoided brands entirely. He claims that these brands “authenticate the content.”¹⁶ Children are likely exposed to them in their everyday lives, and have already processed their messages well before coming to KidZania. But, while optional or incidental in a child’s fantasy grown-up play, here brands are unavoidable. The most common indictment of KidZania leveled by critics, these brands in fact form a core part of KidZania’s business model.

In the case of the bottling plant, the company has just engaged a young consumer directly in the very act of producing a key component of the brand. Their play has resulted in them “being a grown-up at a Coca-Cola plant,” and they have their very own bottle of Coke—produced by their very own hands—to prove it. It’s a novel take on what Pine and Gilmore have called “Paying Labor” where one pays to have a work experience that both edifies the consumer and provides products or services to the host.¹⁷ (Perhaps the most well known retail example of this is the Build-a-Bear workshop stores, where you pay to build—select a skin for, stuff, and clothe and decorate—your own stuffed bear.) What is unique about the paying labor model of KidZania is that, while a child may walk away with a winket that they produced, this “job” itself is at the service of the larger job they are performing, complementing the real life work of the brand manager.

It’s a “win-win”...win...operation, according to Xavier López Ancon:

The KidZania business model is two-fold: on one side we are a family edutainment center where kids roleplay

and can get a sense of life as an adult. On the other hand, KidZania is a new marketing media for brands. I think it is a win-win-situation: marketing partners win because they can get their brand, products or services closer to kids and their families; children win because they have a fun and educational place to play, learn and have a good time and parents win because they see their kids having fun and also learning important life lessons.¹⁸

The “real-life” aspect of each work experience is reinforced (in the real-life that occurs within KidZania) by being immersively situated within the bustle of a city “outside.” KidZania’s major events, like the hotel fire, parades, or the singing of the KidZania welcome song, occur on the streets of the city, bringing life to what otherwise amounts to an idiosyncratically sculpted corridor. The economy of KidZos, the volatile currency that undergirds both formally structured (for example, the bottling plant) and loosely structured (for example, purchasing an item at the in-KidZania shopping mall) experiences coheres the narrative and calibrates them to the free market. And, while mostly invisible to the children visiting a KidZania location, the political narrative that underpins the civic backstory and the civic nomenclature of the corporate hierarchy wraps the entire organization—company, franchises, employees, and visitors—directly into one consistent backstory. This highly unique construction operates like a controlled petri dish for immersive branding experiences.

The Critic and the Designer (or “Criticism and Design”)

The social critic typically frames such a controlling environment as exemplifying all that is wrong with corporate empowerment over the consumer. The architectural critic typically frames it as ersatz, cheese, novelty of the worst kind, detracting from the true power of architecture to positively transform experience. The experience designer conceives and realizes it as a contemporary evolution of centuries of speculation and design production, exploring the heights of affective multi-channel, multi-sensory environment design. The partner sees it as a one-of-a-kind opportunity for “interactive publicity” or brand immersion. The enthusiastic child engages it as a stimulating and safe play-scape where activities and their outcomes are wholly in their control. Through the very same artifacts, environmental cues, and activities, each of these perspectives contributes to the complicated folds of agency experienced in KidZania. It is empowering *and* disempowering, supportive *and* challenging of free will, educational *and* consumerist. In fact, such polarities are already absorbed into both the backstory and the company’s business model itself, as we have seen. They only appear as contradictions when we attempt to apply many of the conventional analytical tools of the critic.

And this is the claim that I am ultimately seeking to make, that the many layers of backstory that undergird the intensely themed environment complicate our capacity to make easy claims about these categorizations—but that they *only* complicate them, laying them open to empowering critical analysis if (and only if) this critical analysis embraces alternative frameworks.

Even when critical theory moves beyond reductive qualitative assessments and into more productive ground, the very concept of the themed environment continues to be vexing. Barthes’s “mythography” or Baudrillard’s “simulacra” still stand as first-generation western theoretical frameworks in this area, but each still polarizes: an imbalanced power dynamic of the “writers” and “readers” of cultural myths (a prescient analogue to the themed backstory) in the case of Barthes, and a theoretical separation of the real from the signs of the real in the case of Baudrillard.¹⁹ As we get closer to the subject of themed environments with works such as Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image* or Dean MacCannell’s *The Tourist*, we get even farther from a nuanced understanding as qualitative assessments like the former’s “pseudo-events” and the latter’s work/leisure polarities kick in.²⁰ Even Foucault’s otherwise prescient theorization of the heterotopia begat our more contemporary “third space” frameworks, acknowledging yet still extracting the themed environments from the cultures of everyday life.²¹ The majority of critical work on themed experience design continues, even in the ensuing decades, to insist that we understand themed environments apart from lived experience, setting up a *prima facie* argument for why they must be treated (critically) differently. In a similar vein, negative critiques of themed environments often stem from an argument that these environments (and their owners and designers) “make passive” their inhabitants through strategies of control. Such passive individuals are argued to have their agency substantially curtailed or delimited by these strategies, and critical frameworks present what is “wrong” with the structures within which these passive actors are operating—or frequently what is wrong with the structures (economies, cultural beliefs, and so forth) behind these structures. Either the

“extractive” or “passive-actor” reading is offered as a precondition for change: a change that, still persistent from Marx, is often perceived as necessarily revolutionary.

Actor network theory gets us closer to a productive alternative, affording an understanding of an owner-designer-environment-inhabitant-etc. network that produces conditions for the formation of agency. Here, agency is a result of interactions among components of the network, and must of necessity establish itself dynamically, contextually, *in situ*. This framework operates at two levels in my critique: both at a level that sees the themed environment as a component of everyday lived experience, and at a level that sees the individual person as a component of the themed experience. This negates the “extractive” theoretical frameworks that require that the themed environment be established as something “other” than normative lived experience. And it negates the “passive-actor” theoretical frameworks that require that individual’s agency be seen as curtailed or delimited by controlling environmental strategies. What it leaves us with, however, is a more complicated understanding of agency, one that requires us to pull apart the many network relations in play to better understand its potentials

I can trace the concept of complicated agencies to an earlier exploration I conducted in themed environments in *Making Leisure Work*. Here, focused primarily on the various forms of “textual” encounter one might have with the backstories of themed environments, I uncovered a category of practices that shared the function of providing “extra-thematic readings” of otherwise extremely narrative spaces. Whether they were websites that provided detailed reviews and access strategies for the bathrooms of Disneyland or guidebooks for avoiding overly long queues at theme parks, these efforts represent a productive agency that both enjoys and finds onerous the dominant narrative frameworks of the themed environment.²² They are neither explicitly critical of, nor overwhelmingly exuberant about their subjects. They treat them as matter-of-fact subjects: entertainment destinations that simply complicate quotidian events, like finding a bathroom when you need it.

These, among many other practices, represent the potentials of a form of criticism that acknowledges the complications of agency in places like KidZania. They explicitly lay out the layers of narratives that are present, the subjective needs of the individual actors, and both the enjoyment and displeasure that comprise the themed environment. Their analysis is typically deeper than that of the cultural critic. This is often because their authors’ pleasure in their subject brings them into frequent contact with it, but is also, in many cases like that of the Unofficial Guides book series and website, because the rigor of their data collection operations is directly tied to income and profit.²³ Their limit, however, is that they fail to provide an interpretive framework that is larger than their subject. They choose instead to exploit the rigorous analysis of complicated agencies in practical terms, to aid the wearied or anxious visitor who wants both a commodified entertainment experience and as much subjective autonomy as the destination can afford.

Nevertheless, I believe formal criticism has a lot to learn from this. It must move beyond the polarizing tendencies of critical discourse that deny a more rigorous analysis of the agencies at play in the themed environment. If it can do this, the complications of these agencies become evident. The strange paying-labor self-branding play-work of KidZania can be unfolded and seen as something more rich, conflicted, and multi-layered than critical writing has assumed that it is. Ultimately, this is a trajectory for critical work that itself has greater agency than criticism’s traditionally narrow audience allows; accessibly presented, its findings and interpretations could truly engage the design, production, and inhabitation of intensely themed environments, empowering those who play and/or work on, with, or in them with a greater capacity to express their agency in ways that are not passive with regard to the overarching narratives. This essay is intended as a start.

Notes

1. Brian Lonsway, *Making Leisure Work: Architecture and the Experience Economy* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).
2. Lonsway, *Making Leisure Work*; Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes, Architecture in the Experience Economy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).
3. The design specifications for the Main Street, U.S.A. attraction at Disney theme parks call for the exclusive use of flat-head screws for signs that can be seen by the public. Use of the Phillips screw, while substantially time-saving for regular maintenance, would be anachronistic in a nineteenth-century themed attraction as the invention was not made until the twentieth century. At the Karamelle-Kuche shop in the Germany pavilion at Epcot's World Showcase, hosts wear hairnets as fashion rather than hygiene. Servers in the food stations at other nations' pavilions do not wear hairnets, an accommodation allowed by the state of Florida's adoption of The US Department of Health and Human Services' Food Code, available at <http://www.myfloridalicense.com/dbpr/hr/statutes/documents/2009FoodCode_As_Adopted.pdf>. Traditional German bakeries, however, as a matter of both custom and regulation, include hairnets or hair covering of some kind as an identifiable component of the uniform. See Centre de Promotion et de Recherche der Handwerkskammer in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Verband der Patrons Boulangers-Pâtisseries. Leitlinien-zur-Guten-Hygiene-Praxis für Bäcker, available at <http://hygiene-for-cleaners.eu/media/HACCP_Leitlinien/Leitlinie_Baekerei.pdf?wb_session_id=56a5fab1c044bcecf7bda63f3cbd2ca4>. Hairnets in this case serve as one of a number of attempts to authenticate the ethnicity of Karamelle-Kuche employees.
 4. OED Online, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oed.com>>.
 5. OED Online.
 6. Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems* (London: Routledge, 1998).
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 8. Keller Easterling, *Organization Space: Landscapes, Highways, and Houses in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999). Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (New York: Verso, 2014). Nishat Awan et. al., *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011). Lisa Findley, *Building Change: Architecture, Politics, and Cultural Agency* (London: Routledge, 2005). Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London: Routledge, 1997). Florian Kossak et. al. *Agency: Working With Uncertain Architectures* (London: Routledge, 2009).
 9. Rebecca Mead, "When I Grow Up: The Theme-Park Chain where Children Pretend to Be Adults," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2015, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/19/grow>>.
 10. KidZania Dubai, "What is KidZania?" <<http://www.kidzania.ae/en/WhatisKidZania/OurStory.aspx>>.
 11. KidZania London, "Our Story," <http://london.kidzania.com/en-uk/about_kidzania/story>.
 12. KidZania Kuala Lumpur, "The Glossary of Terms of KidZania," <<http://www.kidzania.com.my/about-kidzania/glossary-of-terms>>.
 13. KidZania Dubai, "City Tour—Industry: Coca-Cola Bottling Plant," <<http://www.kidzania.ae/en/CityTour/Industry/BottlingPlant.aspx>>.
 14. "Performance With a Purpose—KidZania's Win, Win, Win Plan," April 9, 2011, <<http://www.blooloop.com/features/performance-with-a-purpose-kidzania-s-win-win/362#.VhpB7rTHpTO>>.
 15. "Performance With a Purpose."
 16. Jude Webber, "Lunch with the FT: Xavier López Ancona," *Financial Times*, <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/1bc2e7f6-17e1-11e4-b842-00144feabd0.html#axzz3i7syfn1o>>.
 17. B Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, "Take This Job and Sell It: Charging Customers to Help Stage Events," <<http://strategichorizons.com/TakeThisJobandSellIt.pdf>>.
 18. "Performance With a Purpose."
 19. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981). Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1957).
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 22. Lonsway, *Making Leisure Work*, 213.
 23. "Historic Disneyworld Crowds," touringplans.com, <<http://unofficialguide.com/walt-disney-world/historical-crowds>>.